

Video Clip 8

The Teacher's Role in a Literary Community

Length of Clip:	18:55
School:	The Odyssey School
Location:	Bainbridge Island, Washington
No. of Students in School:	125
Teacher:	Barry Hoonan
No. of Years Teaching:	19
Grade:	5th- and 6th-Grade Cluster
Subject:	Language Arts
No. of Students in the Classroom:	31

"Literature comes alive when kids have a chance to interpret and to interact. It allows kids to not only see themselves as active readers, but as people who can make meaning." — Barry Hoonan

About This Video Clip

Barry Hoonan believes teaching is much like poetry. It is crafted, it is magical, and it is powerful when shared. As an act of creation, teaching illuminates the tiny details of living and learning. Entering literature discussion groups as a teacher, Mr. Hoonan sees himself as an improvisational artist, listening and responding to student comments and questions. He is on the spot and ready to take the disparate pieces and help students put them together. Moving in and out of group discussions, his ultimate goal is to help students become independent thinkers and learners.

Trust in students and in their abilities as readers and thinkers is central to Barry Hoonan's teaching. Understanding that students come to his classroom with a great deal of knowledge and information, he begins his approach to literature by taking his cue from the students. Although he makes suggestions and adds information to a discussion when necessary, he prefers to have student voices and understandings predominate.

Each literature group has a facilitator, entrusted with keeping things moving, making sure everyone has a voice, and getting the students to develop their insights. However, Mr. Hoonan has learned that too much structure in such groups can get in the way of creative conversation that sparks ideas students may not have had before. Experience has taught him that students respond to overly structured situations by becoming stiff, asking questions and answering each carefully in turn around the circle. The literature discussions portrayed in this video display the organic, respectful, back-and-forth exchanges of authentic conversations in which ideas are offered, tested, and developed.

Mr. Hoonan believes strongly in the importance of community, especially in this multi-age classroom, and feels that literature discussion groups are an important way to foster classroom community. To accommodate a diverse range of interests, ages, and abilities, Mr. Hoonan offers students a choice of 15 titles linked to the theme "Life's Not Fair." Students are invited to read at least two books and form discussion groups based on the reading of shared titles. In addition, the class read-aloud book *Stargirl* by Jerry Spinelli further enriches the theme. As a way of enriching literary readings, an important component of the literature discussions involves linking issues from the literature with the students' personal experiences.

Visit the *Making Meaning in Literature: A Video Library, Grades 6–8* Web site at www.learner.org/envisioningliterature to access the lesson plan Barry Hoonan used to organize this classroom experience, as well as other related resources.

Featured Texts

Cages by Peg Kehret

Shoplifting, family alcoholism, and a struggle for personal honesty are central themes in this novel. When ninth-grader Kit doesn't make the cast of the school play she goes home to find her stepfather drunk again. Later, she impulsively tries to steal a bracelet and is caught. Sentenced to community service at the Humane Society, Kit is too humiliated to tell even her best friend about the incident. To make matters worse, her final exam in speech is to be an oral report on shoplifting.

Chasing Redbird by Sharon Creech

After the death of her beloved Aunt Jessie, 13-year-old Zinnia Taylor discovers an old trowel covered with weeds and dirt. Her discovery leads her on a quest to clear the 20-mile long Bybanks-Chocton trail that leads away from her family farm. By the time she has uncovered the trail, she has uncovered family secrets and solved mysteries about her family and her past.

Drawing Lessons by Tracy Mack

Seventh-grader Aurora (Rory) finds her world shattered when she discovers her artist father in a compromising position with one of his models. She and her father had shared a mutual love of drawing, and he had taught her about color and line. When her parents separate, she burns her sketchbook and finds herself unable to draw any more. Slowly she manages to rebuild her life and regain her art.

About This Video Clip, cont'd.

Freak the Mighty by Rodman Philbrick

Freak the Mighty is really two characters—both social outcasts—who learn to function as one entity. Kevin, a brilliant child whose misshapen body and stunted growth makes getting around difficult, is the brain. The body is Max Kane, a huge boy with learning disabilities and the conviction, shared by many, that he is stupid. Max carries Kevin on his shoulders, and at first Kevin does all the thinking. Soon Max discovers that he's not as stupid as people think. Kevin demands that Max be placed in the regular classroom with him rather than in the special education class. Max learns to read and write and value himself.

Holes by Louis Sachar

One person, and one person only, is responsible for Stanley Yelnats going to Camp Green Lake, a juvenile detention center for boys—and that is Stanley Yelnats. Or at least that's what the camp counselor tells him. Overweight, friendless, and a target for bullies, Stanley is wrongly accused of stealing the used sneakers of baseball great Clyde Livingston. As punishment, he and the other inmates are ordered to dig holes five feet wide and five feet long in a dried-up Texas lakebed. Stanley accepts his undeserved punishment as the result of the curse that has plagued his family for generations, ever since his great-great-grandfather broke a promise to a Gypsy, Madame Zeroni.

Make Lemonade by Virginia Euwer Wolfe

LaVaughn is a 14-year-old who sets her sights on college but knows she can't rely on her widowed mother for the money. She accepts a baby-sitting job for Jolly's two small children, but quickly realizes that the 17-year-old single mother needs as much help and nurturing as her children. LaVaughn becomes emotionally involved with Jolly's difficulties, and even considers giving her the money she's saved. She makes the decision not to, reflecting, 'That won't help...I feel very mixed but my eyes stay steady.' Instead, LaVaughn persuades Jolly to enter a high-school program for young mothers.

My Louisiana Sky by Kimberly Willis-Holt

Although both her parents are mentally challenged, Tiger Ann Parker is a happy little girl growing up in Louisiana in the 1950s. She always gets straight As, and has won the spelling bee several years in a row. When she enters middle school, Tiger begins to feel embarrassed by her parents, even though she loves them very much. When Tiger's grandmother dies, Tiger goes to live in the city with her aunt since her parents can't care for her on their own. At first, it's exciting to be able to reinvent herself. She cuts her hair and starts using the name Ann. Eventually she discovers the strength of her parents' love and realizes that home is where she really belongs.

Out of the Dust by Karen Hesse

Set in the bleak landscape of Oklahoma during the dust bowl, this Newbery winner is told in a series of free-verse poems by 14-year-old Billie Joe Kelby. Her mother and newborn brother die as a result of a terrible accident, and her hands are severely burned in the fire that kills them. Denied the solace of her piano playing, she fights her guilt, anger, and estrangement from her father, finally learning to forgive him and herself.

A Place To Call Home by Jackie French Koller

Fifteen-year-old biracial Anna O'Dell tries to care for her five-year-old sister and infant brother when her alcoholic mother disappears again. Anna discovers her mother's car in a nearby lake—evidence of her suicide. After hiding in a cabin in the woods and then being placed with an unloving foster family, Anna, in desperation, travels to her mother's hometown in Mississippi, hoping to find family and a home. Instead, she learns of the horrors of her mother's past and meets white grandparents who don't want her.

Scorpions by Walter Dean Myers

Jamal Hicks lives in Harlem with his mother and sister. When his brother is sent to jail for murder, Jamal is left to be the "man of the house." When Jamal's brother tells him he wants him to be the new leader of his gang the Scorpions, Jamal isn't so sure what to do. His brother's friend Mac, another Scorpion, gives Jamal a gun. Jamal feels power with the gun, but he also feels scared and guilty.

About This Video Clip, cont'd.

Slam by Walter Dean Myers

This coming-of-age novel presents 17-year-old Greg “Slam” Harris. On the basketball court, he is in control. Off the court, however, his grandmother is in the hospital, possibly dying; he has trouble fitting in at the predominantly white high school he attends; his grades are sinking ever lower; and his best friend from the neighborhood may be dealing crack.

Stargirl by Jerry Spinelli (class read-aloud book)

Stargirl Caraway, a new 10th-grader at Arizona’s Mica Area High School, shocks the whole school by wearing pioneer dresses and kimonos, strumming a ukulele in the cafeteria, and dancing when there is no music. She does nice things for total strangers. When Stargirl joins the cheerleading squad, she cheers for the other team as well. Leo Borlock, the 16-year-old narrator, falls in love with her and finds himself having to choose between Stargirl and his friends when the school becomes hostile to Stargirl’s unconventional behaviors.

Tangerine by Edward Bloor

Paul Fisher lives in the shadow of his older brother Erik. Visually impaired since five, Paul is an outsider in his own family and seems to be the only one to understand the brutality behind his brother’s football star façade. With the help of prescription glasses, Paul can see, and becomes an excellent soccer player, earning a position as goalie on the middle school team. As Paul records his story on his computer journal, he begins to remember menacing incidents involving his brother. He senses that the mysterious accident that damaged his eyes is also the reason he fears his brother.

Visit the *Making Meaning in Literature: A Video Library, Grades 6–8* Web site at www.learner.org/envisioningliterature for related Web sites.

Viewing Suggestions

Who Should Watch This Video

Teachers and teacher educators can use the video as a professional or preservice development tool showing how one teacher supports small-group literature discussions, helping students extend their thinking without imposing an adult reading on the text. Viewers might notice how Mr. Hoonan positions himself both inside and outside a discussion group, participating and encouraging from one position and simply recording student talk in the other. Viewers might notice how webbing student discussions provides a teacher with a tool for keeping a record of issues raised.

Curriculum planners can use this video to illustrate a way to use thematic links to connect texts appropriate for a range of reading abilities or to develop cross-disciplinary studies between language arts and social studies or history.

Administrators can use this video to generate awareness of ways teachers manage a class in which students are reading a number of different texts.

Before Watching

Before viewing this video, consider the following:

- What are the characteristics of a “good” literary discussion?
- What are the benefits of offering students a choice of literature texts?
- How can teachers manage a classroom in which groups of students are occupied with different activities and ensure that they stay on task?
- How can teachers help students prepare for a good literature discussion?
- How can teachers help groups work effectively during discussion?

Suggestions for Post-Viewing Discussion

Teachers involved in professional development and preservice education may want to discuss:

- What kind of teaching probably had to occur in this classroom to enable the discussion groups to operate so smoothly?
- As viewers, how could you tell that the students were listening and responding directly to one another? Give some examples.
- How would you characterize the teacher’s role in this classroom?
- What are some ways a teacher might assess student understanding of, and engagement with, a text?
- What questions do you have about this teacher’s instructional practices?
- How might you use this video to help teachers learn effective methods for facilitating small-group literature discussions?

Viewing Suggestions, cont'd.

Teachers holding PTA meetings, back-to-school events, or other outreach meetings can use questions like these to start group discussion:

- How might your child respond to small-group discussions such as those portrayed here?
- Did any of the student responses surprise or intrigue you? Why? Give examples.
- How can discussions such as these help students learn?
- What questions do you have about the kind of instruction shown here?

Curriculum planners can discuss:

- What themes or key ideas are at the center of your literature curriculum?
- What literary selections foregrounding those themes or key ideas would be most appropriate for this grade level? Is there any current young adult material that might add value to the existing readings?
- Are there ways in which you might make thematic connections between literature in your curriculum and topics developed in other departments?

Administrators can discuss:

- Do teachers have appropriate resources (book sets, for example) to enable students to choose their own reading materials within a defined theme?
- How can physical issues (classroom size and configuration, teacher/student ratio, external distractions, etc.) enable or prevent teachers from facilitating effective small-group discussions?
- What professional development is available (or might be made available) for teachers who wish to develop their management of small-group discussions?

Suggestions for Post-Viewing Activities

For teachers involved in professional development and preservice education:

- List ways you might teach students to become effective participants in small peer discussion groups.
- List activities you might plan for students to help them respond to their reading and prepare to contribute to group discussion.
- What strategies have you found useful as you keep track of student discussions? Share them with your colleagues.

For teachers reaching out to families:

- Make a list of ways you can help families support their children's reading and their experiences with literature. Consider using brief notes, email, a newsletter, or a course Web site to keep families informed about texts and activities their children will experience in class.
- Encourage parents to ask their children about what they are reading and their responses to it.
- Invite family members into your classroom to observe, and—if they have read the text—perhaps even to participate in a literary discussion.

For administrators:

- Share this video with language arts teachers in your building. Use it as the starting point of a discussion of small-group literature discussions.
- Ask teachers to consider ways in which this lesson succeeds and suggest ways it might be strengthened.
- Provide time for teachers to share effective small-group strategies they have developed.

Additional Resources

The classroom lesson plan, student activity sheets, and links to related resources are accessible at the *Making Meaning in Literature: A Video Library, Grades 6–8* Web site at www.learner.org/envisioningliterature.

You may also be interested in the following texts, many of which can be purchased through the National Council of Teachers of English at www.ncte.org:

Allen, Janet and Kyle Gonzalez. *There's Room for Me Here: Literacy Workshop in the Middle School*. York, ME: Stenhouse Publishers, 1998. ISBN 1-57110-042-3.

Atwell, Nancie. *In the Middle*. 2nd ed. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1998. ISBN 0-86709-374-9.

Bayer, Ann Shea. *Collaborative-Apprenticeship Learning: Language and Thinking Across the Curriculum, K–12*. Mountain View, CA: Mayfield Publishing Company, 1990. ISBN 0-87484-882-2.

Beers, Kylene and Barbara G. Samuels, eds. *Into Focus: Understanding and Creating Middle School Readers*. Norwood, MA: Christopher-Gorden Publishers, Inc., 1998. ISBN 0-926842-64-1.

Berghoff, Beth, Kathryn A. Egawa, Jerome C. Harste, and Barry T. Hoonan. *Beyond Reading and Writing: Inquiry, Curriculum, and Multiple Ways of Knowing*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 2000. ISBN 0-8141-2341-4.

Brozo, William G. *To Be a Boy, To Be a Reader: Engaging Teen and Preteen Boys in Active Literacy*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association, 2002. ISBN 0-87207-175-8.

Close, Elizabeth Egan. "Literature Discussion: A Classroom Environment for Thinking and Sharing." *English Journal* (September, 1992): 65–71.

Commeyras, Michell and Georgiana Sumner. "Literature Discussions Based on Student-Posed Questions." Ed. Jamie Metsala. *The Reading Teacher*. (November, 1996): 262–265.

Daniels, Harvey. *Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in Book Clubs and Reading Groups*. 2nd ed. York, Maine: Stenhouse Publishers, 2002. ISBN 1-57110-333-3.

Elliott, Joan B. and Mary M. Dupuis, eds. *Young Adult Literature in the Classroom: Reading It, Teaching It, Loving It*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association, 2002. ISBN 0-87207-173-1.

Evans, Karen S. *Literature Discussion Groups in the Intermediate Grades: Dilemmas and Possibilities*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association, 2001. ISBN 0-87207-293-2.

Golub, Jeffrey. *Making Learning Happen: Strategies for an Interactive Classroom*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 2000. ISBN 0-86709-493-1.

Golub, Jeffrey, NCTE Committee on Classroom Practices. *Focus on Collaborative Learning: Classroom Practices in Teaching English, 1988*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1988. ISBN 0-8141-1753-8.

Hoonan, Barry. "Drawing on the Artist's Perspective: Ventures Into Meaning." *Literature Circles and Response*. Ed. Bonnie Campbell Hill, Nancy J. Johnson, and Katherine Noe. Norwood, MA: Christopher-Gordon Publishers, 1995. ISBN 0-926-684-248 X.

Krogness, Mary Mercer. *Just Teach Me, Mrs. K.: Talking, Reading, and Writing With Resistant Adolescent Learners*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1995. ISBN 0-435-08815-7.

Langer, Judith A. "Discussion as Exploration: Literature and the Horizon of Possibilities." *Exploring Texts: The Role of Discussion and Writing in the Teaching and Learning of Literature*. Eds. George E. Newell and Russel K. Durst. Norwood, MA: Christopher-Gordon Publishers, 1993. 23–43. ISBN 0-926842-24-2.

Langer, Judith A. *Envisioning Literature*. New York: Teachers College Press, 1995. ISBN 0-8077-3463-0.

Langer, Judith A., ed. *Literature Instruction: A Focus on Student Response*. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1992.

Additional Resources, cont'd.

The Language of Literature classroom anthology series (grades 6–12) and teacher support materials. Boston: McDougal Littell, 2002.

Morgan, Norah and Juliana Saxton. *Asking Better Questions: Models, Techniques, and Activities for Engaging Students in Learning*. Markham, ONT: Pembroke, 1994. ISBN 155-138-0455.

Moss, Joy F. *Teaching Literature in the Middle Grades: A Thematic Approach*. 2nd Ed. Norwood, MA: Christopher-Gordon Publishers, Inc., 2000. ISBN 1-929024-14-2.

Noe, Kathlerine L. Schlick and Nancy J. Johnson. *Getting Started With Literature Circles*. Norwood, MA: Christopher-Gordon, 1999. ISBN 0-926842-97-8.

Phelan, Patricia, ed. *Literature and Life: Making Connections in the Classroom*. Classroom Practices in Teaching English Vol. 25. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1990. ISBN 0-8141-2962-5.

Rief, Linda. *Seeking Diversity: Language Arts With Adolescents*. Portsmouth, NH, 1992. ISBN 0-435-08598-0.

Rief, Linda. *Vision and Voice: Extending the Literacy Spectrum*. Portsmouth, NH, 1998. ISBN 0-3250-0097-2.

Rief, Linda and Maureen Barbieri, eds. *All That Matters: What Is It We Value in School and Beyond?* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1995. ISBN 0-4350-8848-3.

Routman, Regie. *Conversations: Strategies for Teaching, Learning, and Evaluating*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2000. ISBN 0-325-00109-X.

Samuels, Barbara G. and Kylee Beers, eds. *Your Reading: An Annotated Booklist for Middle and Junior High 1995–96 Edition*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1996. ISBN 0-8141-5943-5.

Schoenbach, Ruth, Cynthia Greenleaf, Christine Cziko, and Lori Hurwitz. *Reading for Understanding*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1999. ISBN 0-7879-5045-9.

Tchudi, Stephen and Susan Tchudi. *The English/Language Arts Handbook*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1991. ISBN 0-86709-288-2.

Trelease, Jim. *The Read-Aloud Handbook*. New York: Penguin Books, 1995, ISBN 0-1404-6971-0.

Whitin, Phyllis. *Sketching Stories, Stretching Minds: Responding Visually to Literature*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1996. ISBN 0-435-08879-X.

Wilhelm, Jeffrey D. *You Gotta BE the Book*. New York: Teachers College Press, 1997. ISBN 0-8077-3566-3.

Wilhelm, Jeffrey D., Tanya N. Baker, and Julie Dube. *Strategic Reading: Guiding Students to Lifelong Literacy 6–12*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 2001. ISBN 0-86709-561-X.

Yokota, Junko, ed. *Kaleidoscope: A Multicultural Booklist for Grades K–8*. 3rd ed. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 2001. ISBN 0-8141-2540-9.